

## Factors influencing trust in media: exploring the association between media consumption and news about the 15M Movement

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**Abstract:** Debate over consumer trust in traditional media has intensified due to the appearance of networked social movements, particularly considering media coverage of the protests, the emergence of alternative media and social media as information sources. A survey was created for this study to provide insight into the association between media exposure, trust and political participation in networked social movements, specifically among 15M Movement activists. Data is presented to show to what extent 15M activists view traditional and alternative media as trustworthy. The article also looks at the causes of trust and mistrust in those media.

Results indicate that politically-interested online users placed more trust in information disseminated by alternative media than by conventional media. Furthermore, exposure to social media is associated with trust in media, while age and gender are not. This means that the increased use of alternative and social media involves a decreased trust in information provided by traditional media. Instead, those who do not use social media and those who use traditional media are those who trusted mass media the most.

Over recent decades, the consolidation of the Internet as an important source of information (Pew Research Center, 2011) has caused a change in the information-seeking

behaviour of the population in general and of young people in particular. Nowadays, young people consult traditional media less often, especially in their analogue format. As a result, getting informed has become a social event which is also transmedia and decentralized. The information is spread through multiple platforms, overflowing conventional media (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011). These new trends imply that work within traditional newsrooms is being challenged and questioned by a whole new era of citizen-journalists (Compton and Benedetti, 2010) and this contributes to the appearance of new actors on the information stage. Among these are the various nodes of the networked social movements (Castells, 2012) that have originated since 2009 such as Occupy in the United States, the uprisings in the Middle East and North African countries or the 15M Movement in Spain, among others. These movements are characterized by the occupation of public space and the use of social media to disseminate political information and to mobilize citizens.

In Spain, the 15M Movement, also called the #spanishrevolution, whose adherents are known as Indignados (Outraged), is a citizen movement that began with the massive demonstrations that took place in the main Spanish cities on 15 May 2011, just before the regional elections. In Madrid, following the demonstration, around a hundred young people decided to camp in the city's main square. One day later, Plaça de Catalunya, Barcelona's main square was converted into #acampadabcn. The camps began to multiply across the whole of Spain and saw between 6 and 8.5 million citizens taking part in some way (Ipsos Public Affairs, 2011). As in recent networked social movements, digital tools enabled the protesters to disseminate their own information, optimize their internal organization and establish an interplay between online and offline action (Micó and Casero-Ripollés, 2013). Thanks to social networking tools (Twitter, Facebook, blogs, etherpads, etc.) the 15M Movement created its own information channels as an alternative to the mainstream media (Fernandez-Planells, Figueras-Maz and Feixa, 2014).

Historically, activists tend to disapprove of traditional media coverage (Bakardjieva, 2011). As a result, activist publications become an authentic alternative to the mass media and afford it an appearance of legitimacy (Garrett, 2006). Did the same thing happen with the media coverage of the 15M Movement? The present study examines 15M activists' perceptions of trust in traditional and alternative media –including social media–, exploring whether there is any association between media exposure and trust in media. The reasons behind 15M activists' trust or lack of trust in media are also studied.

## **1. Factors influencing trust in the media**

Audience trust in media has been a recurrent theme in communication research. In the case of Spain, citizens perceive that the national press offers excessively biased contents, showing a high level of politicization (Gómez and Paniagua, 2012). This is also reflected in the amount of credibility given to the news issued by these media: citizens rarely believe news to be impartial. Mass media is believed to lack the different perspectives required to make them complete and is regarded as providing inaccurate data most of the time (Farias and Gómez, 2011). As a result, in 2013, in a ranking of the value placed on various professions by the Spanish public, professional journalism came second to last (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas [CIS], 2013).

Several factors can influence the audience's perception of how trustworthy media are. Gunther (1992) and Tien-Tsung (2005) suggest that perceptions of reliability in media coverage are related to the observer's own partisan and ideological positions. Tien-Tsung's findings suggest that audiences' ideologies and partisanship affect how they perceive the media. In this regard, authors such as Beck (1991) conclude that those sympathising with political groups, social protests or public affairs tend to perceive the media as being unfair or even hostile. Therefore, ideology and political affiliation are closely related with the trust consumers place in media (Tien-Tsung, 2010). The studies cited reflect the 'hostile media effect', according to which partisans tend to judge mass media coverage as unfavourable to their own point of view (Gunther and Schmitt, 2004; Gunther, 1992).

Political engagement is not the only factor for predicting trust in media. Exposure to media has also been used as a predictor of trust (Tsfasi and Ariely, 2013). That is to say that

exposure to traditional and alternative media is all positively or negatively associated with trust in media. While some studies detected significant associations between media use and media trust in the case of television, newspapers and online news (Jackob, 2010; Kiouisis, 2001), others studies found that news exposure via the Internet emerged as negative predictor of trust in media (Tsfasi and Ariely, 2013).

The question of causality between media exposure and trust, that is to say the direction of association, is complex and as yet not resolved as Jackob (2010) and Tsfati and Peri (2006) argue. Therefore, trust in media has also been used as a predictor of exposure. That is to say, people's trust or mistrust of mainstream news media shapes the audience's selection of news media. In this sense, according to Tsfati & Cappella (2003, p.518) 'people who trust the mainstream media tend to watch and read mainstream news. People who are skeptical toward the mainstream media tend to consume nonmainstream sources such as the World Wide Web and political talk radio'.

Socio demographic variables as age and gender can also be studied as predictors of trust in media. But, once again, studies have come up with divergent results. Therefore, some studies indicated no significant associations between age or gender and trust in media, neither in traditional nor in alternative media (Jackob, 2010). But in contrast, others studies reported strong associations (Jones, 2004).

In the last decade, the Internet has become a new channel through which the general public can inform and be informed. As a result, concern about the trustworthiness of mainstream media has expanded to the digital field and audience perceptions of the trust of Internet information has been consolidated as a research topic (Choi, Watt, and Lynch, 2006; Kiouisis, 2001).

Studies have shown that Internet users are more likely to show distrust in analog media than in online media (Jones, 2004). However, in the case of social media like Facebook, Youtube, MySpace or Twitter, the studies found that they are the less credible (Johnson & Kayne, 2014; Schmierbach and Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2012). If it comes to alternative and mainstream media, the media exposure is associated with a distrusting in mainstream media (Tsfati and Capella, 2003).

## **2. Research Questions**

Analysis of the associations between trust, media exposure and civic participation has been a focus for academic interest for some time (Jackob, [2012](#); Uslaner, [2002](#)). The research questions in this study are informed by the scientific literature mentioned above.

**RQ1:** How do the *Indignados* perceive their trust in information about the 15M Movement published by alternative and by traditional media?

**RQ2:** Is there an association between trust in mass media and trust in alternative media?

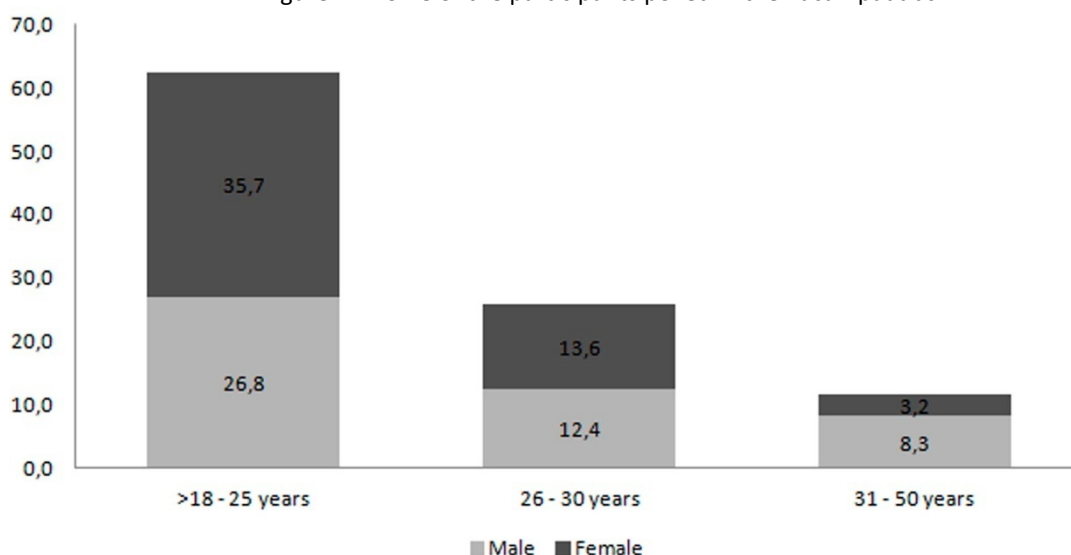
**RQ3:** Is there an association between media exposure and trust in the information published by media (mainstream and alternative) about the 15M Movement?

### 3. Methods

Measuring trust in news media is a methodological challenge (Kioussis, [2001](#); Choi, Watt and Lynch, [2006](#)). There is no generally accepted approach to carrying out this kind of analysis, nor is there a standard scale for measuring the different aspects that make up trust in communication media (Jackob, [2010](#)). The existing scientific literature is used as a starting point for this research and is adapted to the requirements of the object of study, using a triangulation methodology.

Answers to the research questions were obtained using a survey. The survey carried out was designed *ad hoc* in order to study the event. However, in order to validate the questionnaires a pre-test was carried out on May 28 to identify possible anomalies. Each questionnaire was composed of 32 questions. The final questionnaire included 29 closed questions and three open questions, all aimed to get data about the social profile of the *Indignados*, their media exposure and about how trustworthy they deemed media content to be.

Figure 1. Profile of the participants polled in the #acampadabcn.



Source: survey

To analyze the use of media, respondents were asked to report on whether or not they used media from a list including mass media (television, radio, newspapers, both analogical and digital) as well as alternative and social media (blog, Facebook, Twitter and N-1). To analyze trust in media reports or media content (Jackob, [2010](#); Tsfati and Cappella, [2003](#); Pavlicková, Nyre and Jurisic, [2014](#)), a specific comparative study was made between trust in the information about 15M published by the mainstream media and in that published by the alternative media. Following the model of other studies while examining trust in media content (National Election Study [NES], National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey [GSS]) those questioned were asked specifically about how much of the time they trust the media to report the news about 15M fairly. Three possible responses were given: Yes, always or almost always; Yes, somewhat; No, never or almost never. Therefore, the

author opted to analyse the variable 'trust in media content' as an ordinal qualitative variable with three states.

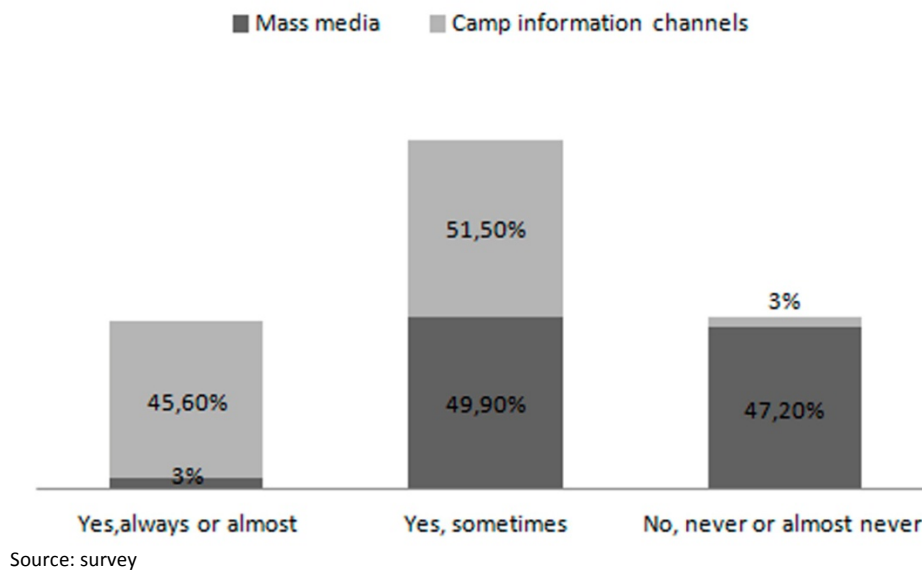
The paper/pencil survey was administrated face-to-face in Plaça de Catalunya. Ninety percent of the questionnaires were completed on location in the activist camp between May 28 and June 25, 2011, although some were also answered by mail. The average survey completion time was approximately 10 minutes. In total 420 people participated in the survey and 339 surveys were validated (80.7%). For the questionnaires to be validated the respondent had to have answered all the questions and the answers had to be consistent with each other.

References in this article to activists or *Indignados* refer only to the universe of the sample, namely to those activists surveyed. There are no data for the number of people who attended the square each day, nor is there information on the socio-demographic profile of the participants in 15M. In selecting the sample the author tried to be as rigorous as possible and attempted to redress this limitation by using a triangulation methodology. Data were collected in the occupied square. It was used a selected incidental sampling taking into account the distribution of the square. Thereby, the square was divided into four zones, corresponding to the areas around the four main entrances to the square. Different commissions were located in each zone, meaning that participants tended to frequent the same zone of the square every day. The author sought to interview participants from all zones. The only selection criterion for choosing people to survey was that they were in the square participating in the movement. The respondents were mainly young people ([Figure 1](#)). In total 161 respondents were male and 178 were female, 110 were studying, 81 were working, 107 were both working and studying and 41 were unemployed.

#### **4. Activists' perception of trust in traditional and alternative media content**

The first research question of this study asks how the activists perceive their trust in information about the 15M Movement published by traditional and alternative media. Survey respondents trust only moderately in the information published about the Movement whether by the conventional media or the alternative media ([Figure 2](#)). The data shows that 47.2% of the *Indignados* surveyed never or almost never trusted the news published about 15M in conventional media and only 3% always or almost always trusted it. As in previous studies (Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, [2001](#)), neither age ( $\chi^2=4.506$ ,  $p>.05$ ) nor gender ( $\chi^2=2.187$ ,  $p>.05$ ) were significant predictors of trust in conventional media.

Figure 2. Trust in information about 15M published in mass media and alternative media.



When talking about the activist media the results were reversed: only 3% never trusted the information issued from the camp's alternative channels and by contrast, 45.6% trusted them always or almost always (Figure 2). Again, neither age ( $\chi^2=2.819$ ,  $p>.05$ ) nor gender ( $\chi^2=2.422$ ,  $p>.05$ ) were significant predictors of trust.

Table 1. Associations between trusts in information published about 15M in conventional media and in alternative media

Trust in information about 15M published in mass media	Trust in information about 15M published in alternative media			p
	Yes, I always or almost always trust it	Yes, I sometimes trust it	No, I never or almost never trust it	
Yes, I always or almost always trust it	70.0%	30.0%	0.0%	.004
Yes, I sometimes trust it	49.7%	50.3%	0.0%	
No, I never or almost never trust it	40.0%	53.8%	6.3%	

Source: produced by the author from surveys done in Plaça de Catalunya.

The second research question asked if there were any association between trust in conventional media and trust in alternative media. As expected, results from cross tabulation and chi square analysis show a strong signification ( $\chi^2=15.313$ ,  $p<.05$ ) of this association. Basically, it emerged (Table 1) that of those activists who perceived mass media as untrustworthy, 93.8% reported high (40%) or moderate (53.8%) levels of trust in alternative media. Of those who do not trust mass media, 6.3% also shown mistrust in alternative media. By contrast, 70% of those who always or almost always trust mass media also trust alternative media.

## 5. Does exposure means trust? Association between trust and media exposure

In order to answer the third research question cross tabulations and chi square analyses were carried out. Therefore, from the study about the incidence of media exposure, it emerged that there are significant associations between media exposure and the perceived levels of trust in media. The results from various perspectives are detailed below. First there is an examination of the association between trust and the use of traditional media versus social media as global categories which lump together various media. Second the association between trust and the use of different types of media is examined one by one.

### 5.1. Association between media exposure and the trust in media

In the case of social media exposure, it was significantly associated with mistrust in mass media ( $\chi^2=6.368$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Therefore, it emerged that 49.4% of social media users reported to do not trust in mass media information about 15M Movement. Only 2.9% of social media users trust mass media content always or almost always ([Table 2](#)). To summarize, the more people use social media, the more they mistrust mass media. And the more people do not use social media the more they trust mass media ([Table 3](#)).

Table 2. Associations between media exposure and trust in information published about 15M in conventional media and in alternative media.

Media use		Trust in information about 15M published in mass media				Trust in information about 15M published in alternative media			
		Yes, I always or almost always trust it	Yes, I sometimes trust it	No, I never or almost never trust it	P	Yes, I always or almost always trust it	Yes, I sometimes trust it	No, I never or almost never trust it	P
Mass media	Use	3.2%	50.5%	46.3%	.682	47.7%	49.8%	2.5%	.170
	Not use	1.8%	46.4%	51.8%		35.7%	58.9%	5.4%	
Social media	Use	2.9%	47.7%	49.4%	.041	46.1%	51.6%	2.3%	.067
	Not use	3.2%	71.0%	25.8%		41.9%	48.4%	9.7%	

Source: survey.

Despite there was no significant association between the use of mass media and trust in information published by that media ( $\chi^2=.765$ ,  $p>.05$ ), it is interesting to stress that 46.3% of those who use mass media do not trust it ([Table 2](#)). However, the more people use traditional media, the more they trust them ([Table 3](#)).



Table 3. Association between media exposure and the trust placed in traditional media.

Media use		Trust in information about 15M published in mass media			P
		Yes, I always or almost always trust it	Yes, I sometimes trust it	No, I never or almost never trust it	
Mass media	I don't use it	1.8%	46.4%	51.8%	.026
	I use 1	2.1%	42.3%	55.6%	
	I use 2	3.9%	56.7%	39.4%	
	I use 3	7.1%	78.6%	14.3%	
	Total	2.9%	49.9%	47.2%	
Social media	I don't use it	3.2%	71.0%	25.8%	.033
	I use 1	4.1%	54.1%	41.9%	
	I use 2	1.5%	42.2%	56.3%	
	I use 3	4.0%	40.0%	56.0%	
	Total	2.9%	49.9%	47.2%	

Source: survey.

On the other hand, despite no significant association is shown between the use of social media and trust in information published by alternative media ( $\chi^2=5.400$ ,  $p>.05$ ) or traditional media ( $\chi^2=3.543$ ,  $p>.05$ ), it is shown that those who use social media were those who perceive alternative media as less mistrust and those who do not use social media are those who most mistrust alternative media. However, alternative media is perceived as most trustworthy whether by conventional or social media user.

## 5.2. Association between specific media use and trust in media content

Following through the analysis of the associations between media exposure and trust in media, blog ( $\chi^2=15,453$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and television ( $\chi^2=9,248$ ,  $p<.05$ ) exposure were significantly associated with trust in mass media (Table 4). This implies that 55.4% of blog users do not trust mass media information about 15M Movement. While in the case of those who do not use blogs that percentage raised only to 35%. By contrast, 64% of television users trusted mass media (highly or moderately) and 36% do not trusted while among non-television users 47% trusted mass media and 52.9% do not trusted it.

Table 4. Associations between the use of each media and the trust in information published about 15M in conventional media and in alternative media.

Media use		Trust in information about 15M published in mass media				Trust in information about 15M published in alternative media			
		Yes, I always or almost always trust it	Yes, I sometimes trust it	No, I never or almost never trust it	P	Yes, I always or almost always trust it	Yes, I sometimes trust it	No, I never or almost never trust it	P
Blogs	Use	1.5%	43.1%	55.4%	.000	47.0%	51.0%	2.0%	.408
	Not use	5.1%	59.9%	35.0%		43.8%	51.8%	4.4%	
Facebook	Use	3.7%	48.8%	47.5%	.538	49.3%	48.8%	1.8%	.085
	Not use	1.6%	51.6%	46.7%		39.3%	55.7%	4.9%	
Twitter	Use	2.8%	43.7%	53.5%	.483	38.0%	57.7%	4.2%	.304
	Not use	3.0%	51.5%	45.5%		47.8%	49.6%	2.6%	
N-1	Use	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	.184	33.3%	66.7%	0.0%	.848
	Not use	3.0%	50.3%	46.7%		45.8%	51.2%	3.0%	
Television	Use	2.6%	61.4%	36.0%	.010	52.6%	43.9%	3.5%	.147
	Not use	3.1%	44.0%	52.9%		42.2%	55.1%	2.7%	
Online TV	Use	5.3%	47.4%	47.4%	.660	44.7%	50.0%	5.3%	.670
	Not use	2.7%	50.2%	47.2%		45.8%	51.5%	2.7%	
Radio	Use	2.3%	65.9%	31.8%	.073	45.5%	50.0%	4.5%	.797
	Not use	3.1%	47.5%	49.5%		45.8%	51.5%	2.7%	
Online radio	Use	10.5%	42.1%	47.4%	.125	36.8%	63.2%	0.0%	.475
	Not use	2.5%	50.3%	47.2%		46.3%	50.6%	3.1%	
Newspapers	Use	1.4%	59.4%	39.1%	.178	44.9%	53.6%	1.4%	.683
	Not use	3.3%	47.4%	49.3%		45.9%	50.7%	3.3%	
Online newspapers	Use	4.5%	46.1%	49.4%	.173	46.1%	51.9%	1.9%	.610
	Not use	1.6%	53.0%	45.4%		45.4%	50.8%	3.8%	

Source: survey

The association between media use and trust in alternative media is not significant. However, it is worth noting the high percentages of trust in alternative media among blog (47%) and Facebook (49.3) users but also among television (52.6%) and online newspapers (46.1%) users ([Table 4](#)).

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

Debate over consumer trust in traditional media has intensified due to the appearance of networked social movements, particularly considering media coverage of the protests, the increase of new activist media and the emergence of social media as information sources. In this article, results are presented showing 1) to which extent 15M activists trusted information published about the 15M Movement in mass and social and alternative media and 2) the association between media exposure and trust in media.

**Political activists mistrust traditional media more than alternative media.** As in previous social movements, the results show increased trust in alternative media (including social

media) than in traditional ones. In this regard, results are also consistent with trends detected by Gómez and Paniagua (2012), Farias and Gómez (2011) and the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas [CIS] (2013) about the lack of confidence Spaniards have in mass media. However, given that all those surveyed were 15M activists, the hostile media effect (Gunther and Schmitt, 2004) could also explain why they tended to judge mass media coverage as unfavourable. While a political bias negatively conditions trust placed in traditional media, in the case of alternative media this factor is a positive influence. As detected by Tien-Tsung (2010) in a previous study of factors predicting trust, ideological affinity or, in this case, sympathies toward a social movement (15M Movement) might be a predictor of trust in media.

However, it is worth noting that activists continue using and, somehow, trusting traditional media to stay informed. As Messing and Westwood (2012) point out, the effects of selective exposure can be softened by the very nature of social media and, in this case, as shown through the interviews, by the activists' wish to know the 'official' point of view. Accessing information through social media meant that, during 15M, activists focused on who was disseminating information and on the messages rather than on the specific media from which it had been redirected. Content selection therefore in the hands of users belonging to the social circles of each activist.

***Neither age nor gender are associated with trust in media.*** As previous studies detected (Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2001), neither age nor gender were significant predictors of trust in conventional or alternative media.

***Media exposure is associated with trust in mass media and non-exposure with mistrust.*** This means that traditional media users trust traditional media while social media users trust social media content. Non-users show high levels of mistrust.

Users of offline traditional media (radio, newspapers and television) were those who most trusted and least mistrusted mass media. These findings are consistent with previous investigations cited in the literature review (Kiousis, 2001; Tsfati and Cappella, 2003). However, this study points to the high percentage of mistrust in mass media among a huge range of media users, all of them activists of the 15M Movement, and most of them youngsters.

Unexpectedly, there are not any associations between social media exposure and trust in those media. However, it is important to stress that social media users showed moderate levels of trust in alternative media, more than in conventional media. Although more research shall be conducted, these results suggest that the emergence of social media as a place for sharing political information may increase the levels of trust in these platforms as information channels. Actually, Johnson and Kayne (2014) have already argued that low credibility scores for SNS were possibly linked to their low levels of use for political information. This could be changing with the appearance of networked social movements and the new uses of social media as political information channels.

**Traditional media users show high levels of trust in all media.** Users of offline traditional media (radio, newspapers and television) were those who most trusted and least mistrusted mass media.

**Alternative and social media exposure is associated with trust in mass media** ([Table 2](#) and [Table 3](#)). This is especially highlighted in the case of blog users, but also among Twitter and N-1 users ([Table 4](#)). Elsewhere, those who did not use social media are those who trusted mass media the most.

The results described up to this point have important implications for understanding trust in traditional, alternative and social media reports among supporters of a cause. Undoubtedly this study presents some limitations. First, due to the characteristics of the phenomenon being studied, the strategy for creating the sample means that it is only representative of the 15M activists related to #acampadabcn. However, it also concerns a broad sample, taking into account the characteristics of public occupations. Secondly, although other studies (NES, GSS) analyzed trust in media with one single question, the statistical tests would have been richer with more than one question about trust in media. Thirdly, future studies should examine not only activists but also citizens not involved in a social movement. This would allow a comparison between population samples who were emotionally and not emotionally involved in a political cause. Hence, political association could be investigated as a predictor of trust in media.

Still, despite the previous considerations, research presents a series of advantages in terms of its contribution to the existing literature about the association between media exposure, trust in social and traditional media and political participation. In Spain, 78% of citizens had heard of the 15M Movement: between 6 and 8.5 million claimed to have participated in some way (Ipsos Public Affairs, 2011). Therefore, this study represents an important step forward in our understanding of trust in media among activists coming from networked social movements. On the other hand, in a context where social media have emerged as an important source of political information, this study set out to discover how social media exposure influenced trust placed in media and their causes.

The results obtained compel to reflect on the social implications of having large audiences, most of them young people, distrusting mass media's political coverage and choosing social media as information channels. As Tsfaty and Ariely (2013) argue, the significance of audience trust in media is a major factor contributing to citizen trust in democracy. The value of traditional media institutions is being transformed, as is that of social media, which is still being defined. The interaction of activists (and citizens) with new and traditional media heralds a change in attitudes and in ways of processing and trusting media information. This affects the way in which social reality is constructed and requires those who are faced with numerous information stimuli on a daily basis to develop a critical view.

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